

The Role of Men in Gender Equality

Exchange of good practices on gender equality. Comments Paper - Denmark

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Exchange of good practices on gender equality

The role of men in
gender equality
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Comments Paper - Denmark

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The role of men in gender equality in Denmark

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1. Introduction

In general Denmark, as the other Nordic welfare states, has a very high labour market representation for women (70 % for women and 75% for men¹), but also a high degree of a gender segregated labour market, with a majority of women working in the public sector and a majority of men working in the private sector.

The share of women achieving a university degree is also growing hastily, now overtaking the number of men. A special issue in Denmark is that children are guaranteed a place in public day-care from the day the parents return to the labour market after childbirth, which normally will be just before the child reaches its first birthday or even some months earlier.

In Denmark a very progressive policy of gender equality was introduced in 2000 with a new law on gender equality that introduced both the appointment of a minister of the government on gender equality, an independent knowledge centre on gender equality and a gender equality claims board. However the liberal-conservative government in office from 2001 to 2011 abolished a number of the newly established initiatives.

The election campaign 2001 also involved a battle on parental leave, especially concerning the share of men taking parental leave. The winning liberal party leader in the campaign promised that he would give the parents 12 months maternity/parental leave, whereas the losing social democratic leader argued for adopting the Icelandic model of three months for the mother, three months to share between the parents and three months exclusively for the father.

In 2002 the law on maternity/parental leave was agreed on in parliament giving parents a total of 12 month leave, 6 month with full pay and 6 month at unemployment benefit level. One month (4 weeks) before birth giving and 14 weeks after is fully reserved for the mother. After that, 32 weeks can be shared between the parents and some of it might be saved for later in the child's childhood. Two weeks are given to the father exclusively in direct relation to the child birth. Earlier on 4 weeks very reserved for the father, so two weeks for the father were then abolished.

In reality this arrangement means that the mother takes most of the leave, as it is now generally accepted that women are supposed to be off from work for one year and that many mothers also consider this their right and privilege in a stressed working life.

¹ Source: www.statistikbanken.dk. Statistics Denmark

In 2013, fathers in average took 26 days of leave, whereas mothers took 276 days². The number of days taken up by men has been slowly declining in recent years.

Partly as a result of this law women's overall employment rate went down, and the number of childbirths is slowly declining. Today women and men are marrying ten years later than they did 40 years ago, have their first child 10 years later and the fertility rates are going down.

1.1. Men as part of the overall gender equality policy

When the current social democratic/liberal government got into office in 2011 it presented its basic points of policies³ to work on in the prevailing 4 years governmental period.

One of the issues especially dealing with equality policies concerning men was to make an in depth analysis of the possibilities for a ban of sex buyers. Although there have been reports of positive results of similar legislation in the other Nordic countries, the government was advised by a board of (male) legal experts not to carry through such legislation, so this policy is now abandoned.

Another policy issue was to earmark three month of the paid maternity/paternity leave to the father. This policy was also abandoned as the Ministry of Social Affairs concluded that the current legislation made it possible for men to take more of the paid leave and that there is also a growing tendency that they actually do so anyway.

A third policy issue was to make an overall effort to diminish the educational deficit of socially vulnerable boys. This is also pointing to the fact that boys are generally lagging behind girls in educational achievement and generally also tend to leave school without finishing the programmes and exams. Especially there is a concern for boys from immigrant families having several challenges in getting apprenticeships that are obligatory in order to fulfil the demands for some educations.

1.2. Supporting men in taking up care responsibilities

To my knowledge there are no initiatives on a governmental level to support fathers to take up care responsibilities in the family. This would probably generally be regarded as a violation of the privacy of the family.

However there are initiatives to recruit men and teachers in kindergartens and crèches, in order to make children experience men as care givers. This initiative is carried out in several municipalities, supported by the Ministry of Gender Equality.

But it is difficult to inspire boys to take up the proper educations to become kindergarten teachers and pedagogues. There are too many other options for boys that are more attractive and the jobs in care work are known to be lowly paid.

² Source: Statistics Denmark, Statistikbanken.

³ Regeringsgrundlag. 2011. Statsministeriet november 2011.

The same goes for the effort to recruit men to become Social and Health workers in the care for the sick, handicapped and elderly. In a time of high employment it might be possible to recruit some men, but men are often able to earn more money in unskilled jobs than they are in skilled care work.

1.3. Combating segregation in the field of education

In 2008 the ministry published a picture book for children⁴ in kindergartens to provoke a discussion of gender stereotypes. This issue has gathered great interest especially after the Swedish debate and the kindergarten Egalia in Stockholm working with gender neutral pedagogical principles. In Denmark one private kindergarten in Copenhagen is now working after similar pedagogics, but without using the gender neutral “hen” instead of “she” and “he”.

In 2013 the minister of gender equality launched a pool of money for projects working with boys to improve their results in schools. In the municipality Roskilde a large project DUR⁵ was initiated encompassing a high number of schools and education programmes in order to make boys more confident in school and for them to choose further education. This goes along with the government's 2011 government declaration that present the goal that 95 % of all young persons should take an education after the 10 years of obligatory school.

2. Policy Debate

In 2011 a think tank called VM, Knowledge about Men, was established by the gender equality centre KVINFO. The think tank consisted of researchers of masculinity, NGO members and activists in the fight for men's rights. The background was that the current minister of Gender Equality had made a board on men's equality consisting of people generally not approved of by the gender equality activists and researchers. This board never concluded its work.

The think tank in 2011 published a 30 steps policy for men's gender equality⁶ in the framework of six overall items:

- Men's health;
- Labour market and parental leave;
- Boys, men and education;
- Fatherhood, family forms and care;
- Socially vulnerable men;
- Men, violence and criminality.

⁴ Den dag Frederik var Frida. Minister for Ligestilling. København 2008.

⁵ <http://drenguddannelseroskilde.wordpress.com/>

⁶ http://www.taenketankenvm.dk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/VM_30-forslag.pdf

About parental leave it says: *“Parents should have equal rights to leave, so that they are formally and in reality secured equal opportunities to leave and to attach to their children from the start of parenthood – unconditioned of their gender and labour market position. Therefore separate leave opportunities should be earmarked, as legal rights contribute to normalise that men also take leave. Wage compensation for men should be secured by maternity pools. The right should not be delimited to a certain period of time, but should possibly be used at other time periods in the joint leave period. The leave arrangements should be secured by law, so that the sharing of leave periods by parents should not depend on who earns higher wages.”*

A number of the policies proposed by the think tank were adopted in the 2013 perspective plan of the minister. Both a campaign for men’s health, a special arrangement for improving the school results and drop out of school and an effort to bring more men into care work were adopted by the minister in 2013.

According to the 2014 perspective and action plan of the minister for gender equality Mr. Manu Sareen⁷ three major equality goals are directed at men and boys:

- To better the health of men suffering more from life style diseases than women and living shorter lives;
- To improve boys educational results by diminishing the dropout rate for boys;
- To increase the fathers share of parental leave;
- Attracting more men to work in day care institutions for children, in order to give the children a more equal experience with adults of both gender and to introduce more men into care work; this goal was adopted in several municipalities, ex Aarhus;
- Improving the educational choice of boys, DUR project Roskilde;
- Health, Men's health week and other subjects;
- To fight social control of both boys and girls in immigrant families;
- To combat violence in the family, addressing also men exposed to violence.

But overall the funds for gender equality policies are very limited and very few campaigns are able to produce sustainable results. There is also a general disappointment with the government not living up to its promises concerning gender equality policy that tend to slow down the results of the vivid gender equality debate in Denmark.

⁷ Redegørelse/Perspektiv- og Handlingsplan 2014. Ministry for Children, gender equality, integration and social affairs. www.Lige.dk.

3. Transferability issues

Since 2000 the Icelandic model of a 3 x 3 x 3 months maternity/parental leave has been a model of example in the Danish debate, but as the leave period was prolonged from 6 months to 12 months in 2002 it has been politically difficult to change the idea that all the leave should be the privilege of the mother, so until now this model has been unacceptable for the political majority maintaining that the parents should decide for themselves, how to share the leave.

Although the social democratic party and a number of politicians from the radical liberal party (de radikale) now in office have been in favour of a fixed number of months privileged for the father, they left this goal and now only make it a point of campaigns. At the same time the trade unions have fought for the fathers getting full salary in at least the first 6 months immediately after child birth. This means that it is now a part of the general wage agreement for many wage workers to have 9 weeks of fully paid paternity leave. Still it is part of the general leave arrangement and means that it is 'taken' from the mothers.

The break of promises concerning a number of cases given up by the present government to some degree killed the public debate on this issue, still young fathers tend to regard taking the parental leave as a privilege and a normal thing to do, at least among some social groups. Other fathers have no experience of being home alone with a baby, whereas mothers developed networks of mothers at leave to meet, go to cafe's, in the cinema, do fitness and help each other in 'mothers groups' often set up by the municipalities.

There are a few arrangements for fathers particularly in Copenhagen to meet with other fathers in special playing grounds for fathers and children focusing on that fathers should develop their own way of parenting not just depending on and copying the mothers.

Denmark could certainly learn from the Icelandic model of parental leave and also from the other Nordic countries. There has been a profound acknowledgement of these models both in the political left wing and in women's organisations. But during the 2000's Denmark partly has turned politically away from the Nordic welfare model very much associated with the Social Democratic Party, towards a more liberal model.

Still the question of the compensation for fathers in their leave is a special case to consider. Iceland several times lowered the coverage for parents on leave. In Denmark mothers can expect a full salary in the first 6 months of leave and it would be discriminating to offer fathers less in the months earmarked for them. Therefore, I will argue that the coverage for men should also be 100 % in the earmarked periods.

Denmark might also learn from the Austrian model of a father's month. It might make it more legitimate for fathers to argue both to employers and colleagues that they want to take the leave. However at the moment the arrangements for fathers in Denmark are better, as most of the fathers will have a month off with full salary. For Danish parents it will be much too low to receive the benefit offered for Austrian fathers.

I would not suggest that other countries use the Austrian model of part time work for parents. Today women in Denmark already often work reduced hours and an official

arrangement would probably increase this for women but not for men and thereby further enhance the gender pay gap.

The Finnish experience is in many ways close to the Danish model, except for the fact that both Finland and the other Nordic countries except Denmark have successfully used quota systems in order both to better women's way into the boards of directors and career system.

In Denmark there is much resistance against quotas in general, as it is argued that qualifications are rendered less important when you are part of a quota. The same goes for fathers quotas, as the more liberal tendency in Denmark demands that families should decide for themselves, although it is well known that there are many more obstacles for fathers taking leave, both in the wider family, among colleagues and by employers.